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Attachment and emotion regulation – clinical implications of a non-clinical sample study

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Abstract

Rooted in early caregiver-infant relation attachment remains a main motivation of human bonding throughout life. People with different attachment styles deal differently with emotional issues in adulthood as well. In this study connection between attachment dimensions, alexithymia and anxiety was investigated. Correlation between avoidance and alexithymia, and between anxious attachment and anxious symptoms was expected and tested on a sample of university students. Correlational analysis partially confirmed hypotheses. Alexithymic features and anxiety correlated with both dimensions showing an expected pattern based on theory of Adult Attachment Interview. Based on these results we can conclude, that people with different attachment styles use other persons – among them psychotherapists – in different modes to help them deal with emotional issues. The relevance to clinical practice is also presented in this paper.

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Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978) formulated attachment theory as a paradigm for dealing primarily with childhood themes and personality development. But from the beginnings it has been implicit in Bowlby's theory, that attachment is an integral part of human behavior from "the cradle to the grave". Taking this notion, from the mid 1980's the attention of some social psychologists has been directed toward adult romantic relations conceptualized as attachment relations. Thereafter other fields of adult attachment theory emerged such as clinical applications, understanding of religious behavior etc.

1. Attachment and emotion regulation

Not only in adulthood, but already in the original formulation of attachment theory emotion and affect regulation have played an important part (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). Although at first glance Bowlby's theory deals mainly with interpersonal issues, the above statement can be scaffolded in two different ways. First, Bowlby (1969, 1973) originally tried to understand reactions of humans and members of sub-human species to life-events that are tightly

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connected with huge emotions, e.g. loss and separation with emotions of fear, grief and sorrow. Second, the protective function of attachment is not only a matter of survival, but a matter of self-regulation as well.

Emotion regulation is a vital part of everyday life in maintaining social relations and well-being. Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions (Gross, 1998). In the following section two out of five aspects of this definition is highlighted in order to prove the relevance of attachment theory in understanding emotion regulation. First, although the definition refers to self-regulatory issues, other definitions include interpersonal aspects as well. Attachment based approach also suggests that self-regulatory capacities are rooted in interpersonal relations, primarily in offspring-caregiver relations. Second, regulatory processes range from controlled to unconscious strategies. Bowlby, as a trained psychoanalyst, suggested the relative importance of unconscious internal working models (i.e. representations of self and significant others) in determining the way interpersonal issues are handled. The AAI (Adult Attachment Interview) approach (George et al., 1984) also suggests that not only social relations but organization of memories is also determined by these unconscious strategies. In this study not the process of these strategies, but rather results of emotion regulation are investigated (experience and expression of emotions) with the help of the constructs alexithymia and anxiety.

1.1. Attachment and alexithymia

In this study the trait approach to alexithymia is preferred. It means that alexithymic features are present in every single human being, and it is not only a clinical, abnormal construct (Parker et al., 1989). Studying connection between attachment and alexithymia has focused mainly on men and psychotherapy and psychological help seeking (Fischer & Good, 1997; Berger et al., 2005). These studies suggest that traditional masculinity ideology and fear of intimacy mediates men's attitudes to avoid psychological help seeking. This implicitly suggests that there should be a connection between alexithymic features and attachment avoidance. This hypothesis has two reasons. First, psychotherapeutic relations can be conceptualized as attachment relations and second, traditional masculinity ideology is connected with lower level of emotion expression, just like in persons with avoidant attachment style.

1.2. Attachment and anxiety

Examining anxious states – especially anxiety coming from separation – has been an important part of Bowlby's work from the beginning (Bowlby, 1973). Early research on attachment styles by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) revealed, that anxiety is present at the episodes of separation in the strange situation in both insecure organized categories. The difference between avoidant and anxious infants – and later adults – comes from the two different ways, they try to deal with their anxiety. Avoidant individuals try to minimize expression of affects by suppressing them with a highly organized and rigid strategy. These rigid strategies serve to “deactivate” affects that would be disturbing for them (Kobak & Sceery, 1988 cited by Slade, 1999). On the contrary, anxious individuals are characterized by the relative absence of structures for regulating affects. So they are usually overwhelmed with affect wanting appropriate regulation. Their strategy to “hyperactivate” affective cues serves the assurance of comfort and care (Cassidy, 1994 cited by Slade, 1999). So it is to be expected, that both trait anxiety and somatic anxious symptoms are connected to attachment anxiety more strongly than to attachment avoidance, since avoidant people lack expression and noticing of emotions.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

51 female and 39 male students (n=90) at University of Pécs, taking part in teacher training constituted the target sample. They ranged in age from 18 to 31 (M=21,6); 32 out of 90 reported not having a romantic relation at the moment, 13 of them not having had any at all.

2.2. Procedure

The self-report packages containing several self-report measures (see 2.3. Measures for details) were distributed to students of University of Pécs by lecturers in teacher training. Participation was voluntary and anonim, 90 out of 120 packages were returned to the author via internal mail. Participants had two weeks to complete the self-report measures. After two weeks acceptance of returned packages was closed.

2.3. Measures

Demographic Questionnaire included personal data (age, level of education, number of siblings) and information on adult romantic relations (if ever had a romantic relation, duration of the longest relation, current relational status).

Attachment dimensions. In conceptualizing attachment classification, a four-category two-dimensional model has been chosen (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). According to their theory the two dimensions are attachment anxiety (i.e. image of the self in attachment relations) and attachment avoidance (i.e. image of significant other(s) in attachment relations). With possible low and high values on both dimensions four categories are obtainable. The dimensions are easily measured by a 36-item scale (Brennan et al., 1998). Participants completed this scale – the so called Experiences of Close Relations Scale. The two dimensions measured are: (1) attachment avoidance (e.g. “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”); (2) attachment anxiety (e.g. “I worry about being abandoned”).

Alexithymia. For the measurement of alexithymia participants completed the 20-item version of Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 1994). This scale has three sub-scales: (1) difficulty describing feelings (e.g. “I am often confused about what emotion I am feeling”); (2) difficulty identifying feelings (e.g. “When I am upset, I don’t know if I am sad, frightened, or angry”); (3) externally oriented thinking (e.g. “I prefer talking to people about their daily activities rather than their feelings”).

Anxiety. For the measurement of anxiety two distinctive measures were administered to the participants. One was the 20 items regarding trait anxiety from State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger et al., 1970) to measure participants experience of anxiety as a personality trait. The second measure was a collection of 13 somatic symptoms of anxiety derived from DSM-IV (1994). Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of experiencing these bodily symptoms (such as e.g. headache). These scores intend to indicate a less conscious, more self-focused aspect of anxiety.

3. Results

Statistical analyses were run on PC, using SPSS 11. Since theoretically sex differences in attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, alexithymia and anxiety exist, first of all these hypothetical differences were tested. No significant difference (at the level of 0,05) was found between the two sexes in any of the variables. Further statistical analyses were run in the complete sample, not differentiating male and female participants. To analyse connection among variables, Pearson’s correlational analyses were conducted. Results are summerized in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlational matrix of self-report measures (Pearson’s correlation and significance)

	Total Alexithymia	Alexithymia Subscales				
		Difficulty Describing Feelings	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	Externally Oriented Thinking	Vegetative Symptoms of Anxiety	Trait Anxiety
Attachment AVOIDANCE	r=0,437 p<0,001	r=0,449 p<0,001	r=0,184 n.s.	r=0,258 p<0,05	r=0,095 n.s.	r=0,225 p<0,05
Attachment ANXIETY	r=0,277 p<0,01	r=0,219 p<0,05	r=0,413 p<0,001	r=0,06 n.s.	r=0,304 p<0,005	0,510 p<0,001

4. Discussion

Results of this study partially support the hypotheses proposed. Both attachment dimensions (i.e. insecurity of attachment in both directions) are correlated significantly with alexithymia, which means that both avoidance and anxiety are connected with problems in dealing with emotions. Patterns rising from the subscales of Toronto Alexithymia Scale indicate, that problems in emotion regulation have different sources in the case of the two insecure – but organized – attachment strategies.

Attachment avoidance is rather connected with externally oriented thinking, which means that persons scoring high on attachment avoidance not only tend to avoid anxiety rising from the closeness of an attachment figure (parent, romantic partner), but they try to avoid dealing with feelings, and evaluate these as irrational, distracting from goals of everyday life. This is in line with findings of the Adult Attachment Interview (Gloger-Tippelt, 2001), but interestingly whereas in the theory behind AAI these strategies are suggested to be wholly unconscious, here in this study they appear to be much more of deliberate choice (since reported in a self-report instrument).

Attachment anxiety is rather connected with difficulties in appropriately identifying feelings, which means that while participants scoring high on attachment anxiety seem to be concerned with feelings and emotions, they have a problem with filtering them. This is again in accordance with AAI (Gomille, 2001), where preoccupied interviewees tend to fail in maintaining a coherent discourse because of their preoccupation with feelings from the past, and being unable to separate them from the present situation.

As concerning trait anxiety and somatic anxious symptoms, the argument can be carried on. Participants with higher attachment avoidance scoring high only in trait anxiety items only, and those with higher levels of attachment anxiety scoring high on both trait anxiety and somatic anxious symptoms suggest the following. The different attentional strategies are best captured in the hypothetical attribution of the source of anxiety. Whereas individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety show more somatic symptoms, this connection is not present in the case of attachment avoidance. So source of anxiety can be different for the two different attachment dimensions. Attachment anxiety is connected to bodily displays of anxiety, so they have an internal locus as source of anxiety in general. On the other hand, avoidance is not connected with somatic symptoms, so they have a greater opportunity to see anxiety coming from an external source (e.g. interpersonal relations). If these hypotheses are correct, it could mean, that avoidant individuals not only have a lower willingness to report psychological problems, but have in fact less mental problems, since external sources of anxiety are more easily avoidable. So their strategy might be adaptive even in adulthood. It can be argued for the adaptiveness of anxious attachment in adulthood as well. Since their anxiety – a hypothesis again – comes from the inside (i.e. preoccupation with own feelings), their tendency to find relief in too close, dependent relations could mean their struggle for finding a person, who could manage emotion regulation for them. This is highly presumable if considering the mutual dyadic sources of self-regulation (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002).

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